Negotiating Romanticism and Existentialism: A Study of Select Poems of William Carlos Williams, Robinson Jeffers and Theodore Roethke

Pradip Mondal

After the publication of his seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot's theory of poetry has influenced in a large way the objective and subjective lyrics written after 1919. The obvious turn has been to bridle the direct emotional surge and to economize the expression even when the narrator's persona is obvious. Some of the leading American poets, whose creative period fell between 1920 and 1960, have drifted away from the extreme kind of impersonality and economy. Generally speaking, Modern poetry is very carefully constructed by the elimination of Romantic emotion and feeling. The usual motive is to suppress emotion and sentiment, to arrive at some direct, intimate and essential truth. Alongside these very clear tendencies in modernist poetry, there appeared another kind of modern poetry, especially prominent in W. B. Yeats, whose modern *economical* verse is found to be mixed up with deep strains of nostalgia, love of nature and various emotional themes, which create a new pattern in modern verse.

Interestingly, while much has been written on the Romanticism of Yeats the Modern poet, some of the American Modern poets retaining the Romantic spirit have been insufficiently treated as the 'Modern Romantics' or the 'Romantic Moderns'. Such were William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), and Theodore Roethke (1908-1963). Roethke's first book *Open House* (1941) shows the influence of

Yeats, especially in its rhythms, an influence that would stay with Roethke for his whole life. Some examples will prove the mixed sensation in their poems. Here is a characteristic sample from Williams' famous poem "Romance Moderne":

> Rain and Light, mountain and rain,
>
> rain and river. Will you love me always?
>
> __ A car overturned and two crushed bodies
>
> Under it—Always! Always!

Camus in his philosophical book *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) explains that Sisyphus is to be seen as hopeless, but for that very reason as an absurd hero. His moment of suffering is his moment of consciousness. Happiness and the awareness of absurdity are the two sons of the same mother earth. Camus believes that men, who are fighting together against a common evil, even though they are fighting a losing battle, can give some meaning to their lives and achieve a sense of solidarity.

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Jean Paul Sartre talks about the importance of the role of choice and the choice of roles in the modern world where God is dead/murdered/irrelevant and the people are without solace. The three poets, selected for my exploration, seem to follow this notion. Here we find a great difference between these modern American Romantics and their European counterparts, especially the British poets to whom we ascribe the term 'Romantics'. In Shelley, Byron, Keats and even in Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth we find that obvious note of escape from the contemporary situation. To avoid the naked reality, some tried to look at the distant past;

some looked to the distant future; some, again, took solace in the lap of Mother Nature; and some tried to live in the supernatural or preternatural realm.

I find that Williams, Jeffers and Roethke were directly or indirectly influenced by ideas of Camus, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. For the sensitive mind which is at the same time susceptible to the broad spectrum of human emotions, it is painful to accept the silence of the universe. Since man has a life to live and to be able to relish it also, he tries to find meaning out of his existence but the universe remains resolutely silent/neutral. This is the '*absurdite'* Camus talks about and this is the particular problem felt by each of the poets. In order to find a meaning, to impose one's own meaning into life becomes inevitable.

Living in an age where traditions are being challenged with the gradual collapse of orthodox religious and moral codes, the quest for meaning and the existential angst have been inevitable outcome. In the modern era the existential crisis has been acute, and an escape route is not easy to find. The escape which was possible for the 19th century Romantics has proved impossible for these Modern Romantics. Facing the situation, finding beauty as a vital component of poetry and a tendency to probe deep into one's own self, namely, introspection—these are, respectively, have been the prerogatives of Williams, Jeffers and Roethke.

The tradition might have taken shape in America with the example of Robert Frost ─ with his ambivalent gesture and stark pessimism expressed in controlled blank verse and his unfailing eye on the New England landscapes. Jeffers's tone is not far from Frost's in

many of his poems, which project the modern poet's restraint exercised on the Romantic idiom:

I chose the bed downstairs by the sea-window for a good death-bed

When we built the house; it is ready waiting,

Unused unless by some guest in a twelve month, who hardly suspects

Its latter purpose…

["The Bed by the Window"]

Roethke's pessimism comes out in a queer gesture of irony and the psychological complexity is more acute in him than in Jeffers and Williams. All of them, however, seem to have been troubled by the existential crisis. Roethke asserts:

We think by feeling. What is there to know?

I hear my being dance from ear to ear.

["The Waking"]

Not to escape from the situation but to face it, to find beauty in it, has been the pre-occupation of Robinson Jeffers. He shows an authentic romantic trait, much like Wordsworth and the Bengali poet Jibanananda: trying to find beauty in the commonplace, even in horrid things. One poem by Jeffers can clarify this:

To feel and speak the astonishing beauty of things—earth, stone and water,

Beast, man and woman, sun, moon and stars—

The bloodshot beauty of human nature, its thoughts, frenzies and human passions.

["The Beauty of Things"]

James E. Breslin commented in *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (1970), "*Paterson* is a pre-epic, showing that the process of disintegration releases forces that can build a new world. It confronts, again and again, the savagery of contemporary society, but still affirms a creative seed. Eliot's end is Williams' beginning." Though Williams insists upon true language and poems springing from situations, a close look at his poems reveals that they are generally constructed upon an unstated, unconscious mythic pattern. In "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower", Williams asserts: "Only the imagination is real! / I have declared it/ time without end." Each of his poems is a fragment of the fluidic imaginative world in which we all live and dream, distinct from but coterminous with the actual world. In the poems in *Spring and All* (1923), consciousness and the world permeate each other. Subject and object are fused, and oppositions disappear between the inner world of the self and the outer world of things. This is Williams's central post-Romantic break-through.

The existential crisis of modern man has usually been expressed in a minimalistic manner in modern poetry. However, these three poets project the crisis in an obviously Romantic idiom, which is not superabundant like Shelley's or Keats's, but quiet and delicately melancholic, sometimes flaring up to describe a landscape tinged with memories. The feeling of nothingness, which is something like a prisoner awaiting release, is very much there characteristically as in many other Modern American poets. For Jeffers, politics, salvation on earth and the whole ideological war of Right and Left

were execrable. Man, he claimed, as though washing his hands of the entire matter, was a "spectral episode" in the scheme of things. But instead of ugliness, we see loveliness in their presumption of the crisis.

But, I think that critical works on these three poets are inadequate, as these do not focus on the poets' handling of Romanticism and Existentialism at the same time in their poetry. They somehow missed the point in trying to show how these poets tried to discover a way of escape to an optimistic plane in spite of living amidst existential angst in the post-World War scenario. The critical commentaries on these three poets are inadequate for fathoming the full meanings in their poetry. Even when plunged in deep existential angst and trauma, these poets expressed their feelings with an obvious Romantic trait. So I think that there is enough scope for exploring how they grappled with the existential crisis in their poetry that are tinged with the Romantic passion.

Tentative Chapter Scheme:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter2: Theoretical basis of the research work

Chapter 3: The New Romantic William Carlos Williams: Reading His Poetry through Camusean and Sartrean Perspective

Chapter 4: Finding Beauty in a Shattered World: A Nietzschean Perspective of Robinson Jeffers's Poems

Chapter 5: Quest for Identity Standing on the Edge of an Abyss: Reading Theodore Roethke's Poems from the Kierkegaardian Perspective

Chapter 6 Conclusion

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